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ABSTRACT

The 10 guidelines in this guide to analyzing children's books serve as a starting point for evaluating children's literature from the perspective of racist and sexist attitudes. (1) Check the illustrations. Look for stereotypes, for tokenism, and for who's doing what. (2) Check the story lines. Look for subtle forms of bias in such approaches as standards for success, resolution of problems, and the role of women. (3) Look at the lifestyles. Are minority persons depicted in unfavorable contrast with white middle-class suburbanites? (4) Weigh the relationships between people. Do whites in the story possess the power, take the leadership, etc.? (5) Note the heroes. Are minority heroes admired for the same qualities that have made white heroes famous? (6) Consider the effects on a child's self-image. Are norms established which limit the child's aspirations and self-concepts? (7) Consider the author's or illustrator's background. Is there anything in that background to specifically recommend this person as the creator of the book? (8) Check out the author's perspective. Does the direction of the perspective weaken or strengthen the book? (9) Watch for loaded words. Does a word have insulting overtones? (10) Look at the copyright date. Pre-1970 books may well be biased. (AN)

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10 QUICK WAYS

TO ANALYZE

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

FOR

RACISM AND SEXISM

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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Both in school and out, young children are exposed to racist and sexist attitudes. These attitudes--expressed over and over in books and in other media--gradually distort their perceptions until stereotypes and myths about minorities and women are accepted as reality. It is difficult for a librarian or teacher to convince children to question society's attitudes. But if a child can be shown how to detect racism and sexism in a book, the child can proceed to transfer the perception to wider areas. The following ten guidelines are offered as a starting point in evaluating children's books from this perspective.

1. CHECK THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Look for Stereotypes. A stereotype is an oversimplified generalization about a particular group, race or sex, which usually carries derogatory implications. Some infamous (overt) stereotypes of Blacks are the happy-go-lucky, watermelon-eating Sambo and the fat, eye-rolling "mammy"; of Chicanos, the sombrero-wearing peon or fiesta-loving, macho bandito; of Asian Americans, the inscrutable, slant-eyed "Oriental"; of Native Americans, the naked savage or "primitive" craftsman and his squaw; of Puerto Ricans, the switchblade-toting teenage gang member; of women, the completely domesticated mother, the demure, doll-loving little girl or the wicked stepmother. While you may not always find stereotypes in the blatant forms described, look for variations which in any way demean or ridicule characters because of their race or sex.

Look for Tokenism. If there are non-white characters in the illustrations, do they look just like whites except for being tinted or colored in? Do all minority faces look stereotypically alike, or are they depicted as genuine individuals with distinctive features?

Who's Doing What? Do the illustrations depict minorities in subservient and passive roles or in leadership and action roles? Are males the active "doers" and females the inactive observers?

2. CHECK THE STORY LINE

The Civil Rights Movement has led publishers to weed out many insulting passages, particularly from stories with Black themes, but the attitudes still find expression in less obvious ways. The following checklist suggests some of the subtle (covert) forms of bias to watch for.

Standard for Success. Does it take "white behavior standards for a minority person to "get ahead"? Is "making it" in the dominant white society projected as the only ideal? To gain acceptance and approval, do non-white persons have to exhibit extraordinary qualities--excel in sports, get A's, etc.? In friendships between white and non-white children, is it the non-white who does most of the understanding and forgiving?

Resolution of Problems. How are problems presented, conceived and resolved in the story? Are minority people considered to be "the problem"? Are the oppressions faced by minorities and women represented as casually related to an unjust society?

Are the reasons for poverty and oppression explained, or are they accepted as inevitable? Does the story line encourage passive acceptance or active resistance? Is a particular problem that is faced by a minority person resolved through the benevolent intervention of a white person?

Role of Women. Are the achievements of girls and women based on their own initiative and intelligence, or are they due to their good looks or to their relationship with boys? Are sex roles incidental or critical to characterization and plot? Could the same story be told if the sex roles were reversed?

3. LOOK AT THE LIFESTYLES

Are minority persons and their setting depicted in such a way that they contrast unfavorably with the unstated norm of white middle-class suburbia? If the minority group in question is depicted as "different," are negative value judgments implied? Are minorities depicted exclusively in ghettos, barrios or migrant camps? If the illustrations and text attempt to depict another culture, do they go beyond over-simplifications and offer genuine insights into another lifestyle? Look for inaccuracy and inappropriateness in the depiction of other cultures. Watch for instances of the "quaint-natives-in-costume" syndrome (most noticeable in areas like costume and custom, but extending to a behavior and personality traits as well).

4. WEIGH THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PEOPLE

*Do the whites in the story possess the power, take the leadership, and make the important decisions? Do

non-whites and females function in essentially supporting roles?

*How are family relationships depicted? In Black families, is the mother always dominant? In Hispanic families, are there always lots of children? If the family is separated, are societal conditions--unemployment, poverty--cited among the reasons for the separation?

5. NOTE THE HEROES

For many years, books showed only "safe" minority heroes--those who avoided serious conflict with the white establishment of their time. Minority groups today are insisting on the right to define their own heroes (of both sexes) based on their own concepts and struggles for justice.

When minority heroes do appear, are they admired for the same qualities that have made white heroes famous or because what they have done has benefited white people? Ask this question: "Whose interest is a particular figure really serving?"

6. CONSIDER THE EFFECTS ON A CHILD'S SELF-IMAGE

*Are norms established which limit the child's aspirations and self-concepts? What effect can it have on Black children to be continuously bombarded with images of the color white as the ultimate in beauty, cleanliness, virtue, etc.? Does the book counteract or reinforce this positive

association with the color white and negative association with black?

*What happens to a girl's self-image when she reads that boys perform all of the brave and important deeds? What about a girl's self-esteem if she is not "fair" of skin and slim of body?

*In a particular story, is there one or more person with whom a minority child can readily identify to a positive and constructive end?

7. CONSIDER THE AUTHOR'S OR ILLUSTRATOR'S BACKGROUND

Analyze the biographical material on the jacket flap or the back of the book. If a story deals with a minority theme, what qualifies the author or illustrator to deal with the subject? If the author and illustrator are not members of the minority being written about, is there anything in their background that would specifically recommend them as the creators of this book?

*Similarly, a book that deals with the feelings and insights of women should be more carefully examined if it is written by a man--unless the book's avowed purpose is to present a strictly male perspective.

8. CHECK OUT THE AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE

No author can be wholly objective. All authors write out of a cultural as well as personal context. Children's books in the past have traditionally come from authors who are white and who are members of the middle class, with one

result being that a single ethnocentric perspective has dominated American children's literature. With the book in question, look carefully to determine whether the direction of the author's perspective substantially weakens or strengthens the value of his/her written work. Are omissions and distortions central to the overall character or "message" of the book?

9. WATCH FOR LOADED WORDS

A word is loaded when it has insulting overtones. Examples of loaded adjectives (usually racist) are "savage," "primitive," "conniving," "lazy," "superstitious," "treacherous," "wily," "crafty," "inscrutable," "docile," and "backward."

*Look for sexist language and adjectives that exclude or ridicule women. Look for use of the male pronoun to refer to both males and females. While the generic use of the word "man" was accepted in the past, its use today is outmoded. The following examples show how sexist language can be avoided: ancestors instead of forefathers; chairperson instead of chairman; community instead of brotherhood; fire fighters instead of firemen; manufactured instead of manmade; the human family instead of the family of man.

10. LOOK AT THE COPYRIGHT DATE

Books on minority themes--usually hastily conceived--suddenly began appearing in the mid-1960's. There followed a growing number of "minority experience" books to meet the new market demand, but most of these were still written

by white authors, edited by white editors and published by white publishers. They therefore reflected a white point of view. Only very recently, in the late 1960's and early 1970's, has the children's book world begun to even remotely reflect the realities of a multiracial society. And it has just begun to reflect feminists' concerns.

The copyright dates, therefore, can be a clue as to how likely the book is to be overtly racist or sexist, although a recent copyright date, of course, is no guarantee of a book's relevance or sensitivity. The copyright date only means the year the book was published. It usually takes a minimum of one year--and often much more than that--from the time a manuscript is submitted to the publisher to the time it is actually printed and put on the market. This time lag meant very little in the past, but in a time of rapid change and changing consciousness, when children's book publishing is attempting to be "relevant," it is becoming increasingly significant.

Additional copies of this pamphlet are available for 25¢ each plus postage or $7.50 per hundred.

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